

Denial Is The Killer

And Other Stories



Charles Nfon

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Langaagrp@gmail.com

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Chapter 1

Denial Is the Killer

“I have the human immunodeficiency virus in me,” Noyen said, inducing gasps and stares, an intimidating mix, sufficiently strong to scare even the best of public speakers. But not Noyen; he’d developed a thick skin; it would take more than gasps and questions to dissuade him from his mission. So he waited patiently for calm to return.

His audience of one hundred young adults was an impressive crowd for Ronk, a small village in the rural part of an impoverished Sub-Saharan African country. The hall, an unimpressive structure, forty metres long and twenty two metres wide, was a perpetual work in progress. The mud brick walls were four metres high. The roof was of zinc, the absence of a ceiling rendering the rafters, a network of prematurely cut eucalyptus tree trunks, visible from the inside. Overall, the building looked fragile, like a badly made kite waiting to be blown and shattered by a tropical tornado. Thin iron rods attached to the edges of the rafters above and around heavy rocks on the ground were designed to prevent any such occurrence. The cemented floor was uneven, a handy work of the village self-proclaimed construction expert thanks to the year he spent in the city handing bricks to true construction workers. He had a way of

turning defects in his work into inventions. He would say the depressions on the floor were designed to hold water during cleaning and preclude the need for multiple buckets. The stage, an elevation at the front of the hall, meant to be flat, was slanted forward and to one side, also, according to the expert, a design to make water drain fast so VIPs couldn't slip and fall.

"Yes, I'm HIV positive, it isn't a joke," Noyen continued.

Then there was silence, uncharacteristic for a room full of young adults. Every eye was fixed on him, he'd captured their attention.

It was almost midday. The sound of zinc stretching, responding to the hot tropical sun intermittently interrupted the silence. Hot humid air mixed with dust drifted into the hall. Some shifted uncomfortably on their seats, rows of wooden or bamboo benches across the hall.

Sweat ran down Noyen's cheeks; not a nervous cold sweat. The tropical sun was sufficiently hot to turn the impossibility to reality, like cause a dog to sweat from all over its body. Pulling a handkerchief from his trousers pocket, he methodically wiped his face.

"And, it just about killed me," he continued, ending the eerie silence. "No, I'm sorry, that isn't true. It wasn't HIV, it was my denial of reality that almost killed me," he added, pausing, quickly surveying the blend of facial expressions in the front rows.

"Hard to tell by my physical appearance, right?" he asked, going to the side of the platform to show off his physique.

“In reality, I’m almost as fit as a fiddle. But it wasn’t always like this and I’m not completely out of the woods,” he added.

“I want to tell you my story; some place in this story is the manner by which I got infected. It’s my story but could be that of the large number who never had my fortune to still be alive.

“Why recount this story?” you may ask. I tell it not out of pride, nor lament. This I do with the expectation that at least one individual learns from my mistakes; that the bug stops with me and you if, similar to me, you as of now have it, or before you, in the event that you are clean.

“I was born in Huft, halfway down the steep slope, on the Kuv-Ronk main road. My ancestors one way or another thought it smart to live in perpetual fear of mudslides from the unstable and fragile landscape. Or perhaps one of their wives was pregnant and where she gave birth was called home, which happened to be this precarious piece of land we now call home. It’s a place where everyone knows excessively much about everyone; where each household has domesticated animals as housemates but make no mistake, these are not pets; almost every youngster is without shoes, feet with outer scars, their appearance untidy; each passing automobile draws attention and just a special few pursue formal education. Subsistence farming is our lifestyle, our destiny, with the exception of the ones who left for the city.

Despite its shortcomings, I love my village.

However, I also wanted to experience city life. I'd heard interesting stories about the city. Some years back, during the end of year festivities which bring most people back to the village, I was sitting with my back-from-the-city friends under a kolanut tree near my mud house, enjoying a cup of palmwine. It was a hot afternoon in the dry season. A chicken scratched in the ground near my leg, and a rat loitered at the edge of the brush, both searching for food crumbs.

"Rat!" said my friend James contemptuously.

Just then, another chicken ran out of the coffee farm, its life apparently on the line.

"Snake!" James screamed, and moved abruptly, subsequent to seeing the reason for the frantic chicken run. This caused the snake to stop suddenly. A standoff ensued, the snake raising its head and widening its neck, mouth opened to display menacing vehicles of venom, accompanied by back and forth swaying movement. It was a cobra. We all glanced around for sticks, or anything to scare it away. Taking advantage of our brief distraction, the snake disappeared into the bushes. How savvy of the creature; displaying its power and potential to harm but choosing a quiet escape when offered the opportunity.

I was shaken and my friends were terrified.

"You see, if you joined us in the city, you wouldn't have to worry about poisonous snakes or live like a farmer," James said, moving to the centre of the yard, keeping a safe distance from the bushes.

“Yes,” said William, and poked me in the arm, which annoyed me. “You should listen, Noyen. You’re wasting your life here. The city is the life for you, man!”

They went on to tell and embellish stories about the city, stories so alluring that experiencing city life turned into an absolute necessity for me, an obsession so to speak.

A seed was planted on fertile ground, adequately watered and it took root and grew. I worked hard, and saved as much money as I could. Within a couple of months, my savings were sufficient for the fare to the city.

James, William and other friends welcomed me to the city and to the fraternity where membership opens doors to truth; nobody lets you know the tough dirty details until you turn into one of them, another naive newcomer reckoning an easy beginning.

Stacking trucks with heavy cargo was my first job offer and I had the muscles for it. I could have passed for a weightlifter; thick biceps, broad chest and chubby fingers. The nickname “*Super Makia*” said it all.

After a month of hard work, my first pay, to a villager unfamiliar with lump sums, felt like a jackpot. Good reason for a celebration. So an outing with friends was in order, beer and dance featuring high on the menu.

You know the impacts of alcohol on the mind. What you may not know, or maybe think little of, is the impact of the music and dance moves in city bars. The popular music in itself, tells a story. The tunes, ordinarily five minutes, begin slow, increase in tempo and end with a

short climax. Longer songs leave performers tired before the climax.

The dance moves are no coincidence either. The alternate hip movements, excited gyration and forward pushing of the butt, simulating... you know what... leave a great many minds contemplating simply that. Add alcohol to the blend, and all restraints are sent to the bottom of an intoxicating ocean. This was the milieu for our outing.

At the end of the night, drunk, I did what was typical of city laborers on payday, good advertising and elaborate display of assets guiding my choice of a service provider for the night. This one had caught my attention very early. Her display had included bending her knees, stooping as low as she could and pushing her buttocks back and forth in a calculated rhythm. My eyes had popped out with each of her moves and I'd started to salivate and down my drink indiscreetly. I'd thought at some point she would scrub the dirty floor with her behind but she'd stopped just short. Then she'd paused, swung from side to side, before lifting one leg off the floor and rehashing prior moves, except this time marginally out of beat.

I procured her services and anticipated a replication of earlier dance moves in a private and more intimate setting.

Condoms were at the forefront of my thoughts as she led the way to her residence. In the meantime, deception from awful companions played at the back of my psyche like that tune we despise yet chime in to, not able to help ourselves.

“On ne suce pas le bonbon dans son caoutchouc,” one had exhorted in French, underscoring the inconceivable possibility of completely relishing a rubber-covered sweet.

AIDS or by its French acronym, SIDA, was a *‘syndrome imaginaire pour decourager l’amour,’* another had said, persuaded that AIDS was nonexistent.

Additionally, the area shack, playing local movies by day and porn by night, had stacked my brain with deviant fantasies.

Nevertheless, there was that small voice, deep down, the voice of reasoning; Holy Spirit, if you are a Christian, urging and pleading for me to stop, turn around and flee. So I was equally a little nervous and reluctant.

On the other hand, my merchant, eager to finalize a business deal and return to the market, sensed my hesitation and urged me on in terms fit only for obscure environments and adult ears.

“I don’t have all night with you,” she added after her profane outburst, noisily popping her chewing gum between substantial murmurs of disappointment. “Move it man, other clients are waiting,” she went on, oblivious of the attention she’d attracted from passers-by. I wondered how many clients she serviced on an average night, almost succumbed to the temptation to ask but decided not to rattle her cage any further than necessary. The influence of alcohol and obscurity also kept me from backing out.

She led the way through narrow passages between ghetto style buildings, buildings with walls made of rejected wood and roofed with rusty brown zinc most

likely recovered from demolished structures in the well off part of the city. Sounds filtered through the porous walls, grumblings from unsatisfied clients and the instant rebuffs from the business-minded service providers; and the occasional moans and groans which left nothing to imagination. Clearly, this was a designated area for the oldest and most enduring profession mankind has ever known, a modern day Sodom and Gomorrah. Darkness increased the further we drifted away from the major street, but my guide knew the road like the back of her hand, skipping, jumping and turning sharply to evade puddles, stumps and much more.

Alas we were in another shack, where the viewer of ...you know what... was to become the actor. And I devoured the sweet '*sans caoutchouc*,' picking full flavor over safety.

We were back to the bar, the return trip apparently faster.

Not long after finishing my business, I wondered whether I'd sunk my life into a hole by digging for a short-lived climax. However, this worry soon disappeared as I neither saw nor felt bothering signs in private places on subsequent days. In my mind, I'd dodged a bullet. At the same time I also realized that some outcomes for a solitary carelessness could take months, if not years, to show.

It was life as usual for the rest of the month. Then another payday came and to the joint I went, and went for another hooker at the end of the night. This turned into a month to month custom, an alternate whore every

visit, hoping to discover one who might convey the bundle as promoted. Obviously this area was more inclined to the very predominant misleading advertising, the X-rated dance moves never making it to the shack. Likewise, obviously, condoms were no more than a thought on these ensuing business sessions.

The progressive decrease in my weight and condition over a two year period was not noticeable at first. Anyhow, increasing weakness and a myriad of successive ailments, along with my now loosely fitting jeans and shirts, got me considering and dreading the worst. Headaches, muscle pains, loss of appetite, diarrhea and much more, increased in frequency. I self-medicated with drugs from roadside vendors, a hospital visit for the city's poor being inconceivable.

From this point, my condition deteriorated very rapidly. I kept going to work but my productivity was far below average. Had it been a government job I would have kept showing up for work in the literal sense. Unfortunately, in the private sector and particular with my kind of job, showing up has never been good enough. Therefore, I eventually lost my job.

The downward spiral accelerated from there on, depression mixed with desperation pushing me to the brink. If I had an easy off button for life, I would have pushed it. I was willing to go.

Concerned friends, educated by numerous previous experiences, knew it was less expensive to send a half dead body home than repatriate a cadaver, and

contributed money for my immediate return to my village.

The trip was torturous. I arrived late in the night, not a coincidence by any means. All I wanted was to sneak into the village, into a room and never come out alive. Coming back from the city empty handed and a shadow of my former self was, in my opinion, only a sight for midnight ghosts, my soon to be companions.

But my plan had not taken into consideration the reaction of caring parents. I mean, just imagine how panicked they were at seeing their dearest child. I was only twenty five at the time, but looked more like an octogenarian; sunken eyes barely visible on a head too big and heavy for my extremely small body. I could've passed for a skeleton dressed in human skin; in other words, skin on bone.

My parents probably had the longest night of their lives and were up early the next day, taking me, against my will, to the lone nurse in the village, who, without mincing words, let me know some hard truths.

The nurse lamented the fact that young men left for the city with the impression they would bring the city back with them, but only succeeded in bringing the city germ (HIV) back to the village. They helplessly hovered between life and death, most hoping and begging for the latter. She said she'd heard about a popular Michael Jackson song *Thriller*, in which skeletons were seen roaming the streets. This supposedly alien concept was being played live in front of her, in Huft, she said. The ones who came or were forcefully brought to her

received free medicine thanks to the generosity of the United States of America and other international donors, and their poor folks nursed them back to semi good health.

Unfortunately, once these young men returned from the brink of death and felt stronger, they went on germ spreading sprees, donating the killer germ to naïve village girls, instead of protecting them. Their condition deteriorated as they also began to skip medication, at which point the nurse was unable to help. Then they resorted to fake native doctors who were all so happy to look for scapegoats. According to these conmen, it was no longer the dreadful virus killing these young men; it was the jealous uncle, the ugly widow or the riverine magician. Yes, these fake doctors, devoid of conscience and famish for food and wine, misled their patients in return for a fowl, a goat or a jug of wine, the nurse recounted.

“Promise me you’ll be different and not spread what is in you,” she requested.

“What promise can a man like me make?” I asked, my voice barely audible. “I have nothing to offer anyone,” I continued before changing my mind.

“Wait a minute! There is actually a promise I can make and certainly keep. I promise you death, my own death,” I continued, with as much sarcasm as I could afford.

“Death is inevitable. We shall all die someday. The only variables are how and when. But no, Mister, you are not dying just yet,” the nurse said to me, again begging me not to spread my virus.

Being in denial, I said I was the victim of a slow poison, to which she responded, “Oh yes, it’s a slow poison alright. It isn’t a chemical poison, it’s a slow biological agent, a tiny organism that kills your cells slowly over many months, leaving you defenseless against its opportunistic counterparts. Noyen, the sooner you acknowledge this, the better help you will receive. Please, promise me that you will not spread it.”

She spoke the truth and it hurt at the time. But, those were the words I needed to hear. I’d been guilty of deriding AIDS patients before. Becoming one was an eye opener, a revelation of the trauma and humiliation of being shunned by everyone, including those once called friends. And denial seemed appropriate.

However, I had an important decision to make and a light bulb suddenly turned on in the darkness that had overtaken my brain; come to think of it, I had nothing to lose and probably, a quality life to gain.

I gave the nurse what she wanted, a promise to be her ally in the fight if I indeed got some healing.

My blood was sent to the city for testing, to confirm the obvious. The nurse then did her thing and today you are witnesses to the rest of the story.

Look at me. I accepted help, medication and advice, and earned a second chance in life. And I want to make it count.

Being HIV positive isn’t a death sentence. Take it from me because I am a living testimony. And life will be even better for us with a little extra help from you.

And you may be asking, “In what capacity would I be able to help?”

It's simple really; show the infected some love and avoid stigmatisation and shunning.

Also help yourselves by getting tested. Most have said they would rather not know. To these I say it's better to know sooner than later. Early treatment prolongs life and your quality of life might not even change. However, your way of life, ought to change such that you don't pass it on.

Denial is the killer in many instances.

Let safety be your gift to this society.

Noyen concluded his speech to a thunderous round of applause. For this crowd, at first troubled and shocked at the mention of HIV, a standing ovation was somewhat of a U-turn. The same hall they stood in would be transformed into a dance venue later in the night, with loud speakers playing songs often referred to as sex calls. Hopefully, Noyen's speech wasn't just water on a duck's back; hopefully there will be fewer new cases of HIV.

Chapter 2

Learned Predators and Unsuspecting Preys

A petite stature gave Maureen that younger-than-real-age look. Beautiful, intelligent, quiet and especially soft spoken, like she could never kill an ant but behind the calm and harmless facade was a sinister character, a wolf in sheep skin, some would say.

Was she really a sheep in wolf skin? Maybe not. What if the sheep was pushed to evolve into a wolf? Or could it be that in every sheep is a wolf waiting to come out when pushed to the wall? Follow Maureen's life and be the judge.

Maureen was born into a peasant family in rural Ekelle, coming into the world in the most natural way; no anesthesia, no doctors, no midwives, just her mother and grandmother in one corner of their small mud house.

Labor had started late in the night and grandma had been summoned to come assist. Maureen's Dad, barred from entering the house once labor intensified, waited outside impatiently. Finally, late morning, the baby arrived.

"It is a girl," grandma announced excitedly. "Now someone can bear my name," she added and the child was automatically named after Grandma Maureen.

Dia....what? Diapers? Was that another Western name for newborn? Old cloth cut into small pieces was as good as any diapers, and luxury for the newborn.

With no artificial formula, nor fancy bottled food, she was fed only breast milk until she could eat solid food. Time came for solid food and mother masticated it in her mouth before feeding to the baby.

Maureen had a typical upbringing for her environment. Poverty was evident as Maureen, the toddler, wore only underpants. Nudity or half nudity for little ones was their norm, not by choice but because they knew no different. Covering triangles and teats with expensive pieces of fabric while leaving everything else exposed was a choice, an adult choice for that matter, in some places around the world. That wasn't the case here, young Maureen only wearing her lone dress on Sundays and special occasions.

Kids in this part of the world were also born with chores written in their DNA and Maureen was no exception. The list included fetching water from the stream, wood from the forest, sweeping the yard even if the broom seemed bigger than the sweeper and sometimes babysitting another child, children taking care of children.

Before long, Maureen was accompanying her mother to the farm, not as an observer, but as a worker.

The importance of Western education had become known to parents but mostly boys went to school. Girls, on the other hand, were groomed for marriage,

education for them considered a waste of time and resources.

However, Maureen's parents took exception to this unwritten rule.

When time came for school, Maureen's father took her to the only elementary school in the region. A line had formed in front of a thatch roof suspended on four wooden poles; this was the headmaster's office and a "classroom."

In an ideal world, birth certificates will be in hand to demonstrate the child's age and ascertain he or she was school age. Not in Maureen's village. Few had birth certificates. They had to pass their arms over their heads; if the longest finger touched the opposite ear, he or she was deemed ready for school. The fast growing and big kids started school early while the size-challenged also suffered delayed education.

Maureen stretched, strained and twisted her body and shoulder joint. "Come on, touch it, touch it, toooouch it!" a determined Maureen urged herself. About to quit, pain radiating from every part of her arm, she felt a sensation at the tip of her ear; that sensation you get when someone is standing very close behind yet not touching you. She was close, closer than she'd imagined. This gave her a burst of energy. She persisted a few more seconds and alas her fingers reached their target.

The headmaster who had written her off based on her small stature, reluctantly put her name down on the class list. Had he known about the hair-concealed depression in the middle of her head that gave her

fingers an extra reach, he would've asked her to come back the next year.

What makes a school? A set of buildings? Good teachers? If the former then Maureen had no school. If the latter, then she had a school, and if both, then she had a fraction of a school. She had committed and proud elementary school teachers who were also the elite of the village, the go to people for advice, the ones who wrote and read letters for the illiterate villagers and thus knew family secrets of almost anyone with a child in the city. They adhered to the school curriculum and the cane, corporal punishment being their default disciplinary tool.

Maureen excelled in elementary school and joined her brother in the city for middle and high school, continued to impress, her brother providing much needed financial support. How lucky she was to have escaped the hard labor her brother endured to pay his way through school.

After graduating high school as one of the top students, university was next and her excitement was palpable. She envisioned a bright future for herself beyond university; a university graduate with a good job, married to an educated man, an older man of course, from the same village. She saw herself in a big office, in stark contrast to her mother who worked in the farm all year round and barely had a break even after child birth. No she was not going to have cracked feet, crusted hands and deformed fingernails all her life like her mother. Not that she despised her mother. In her village, crusty and thick palms were living testament of hard

work, and women were respected for that. But Maureen looked forward to a different kind of respect; the kind accorded her former elementary school teachers or even bigger.

Counting her chicks before they were hatched? Maybe. But that is also called hope and without hope life isn't worth living. Her hopes were indeed high.

However, the Ekellenian University was not for the brightest, although bright ones went there. It wasn't for the hardworking, although hardworking ones went there too. It was a jungle, with survival of the most corruptible as motto. King of the jungle? The professor of course. Most professors were custodians of marks, not knowledge. Fast to lose her pants, top of the class; hang on to her pants, bottom of the class, seemed to be the secret professorial code. Unbelievable; there's no such university in this world, some may say. But as unbelievable as it may seem, this university was a microcosm of the extremely corrupt and lawless nation that was Ekelle.

That was the university environment brilliant Maureen found herself in. However, she was determined to work hard and make honest marks; she was going to succeed on merit, not by compromising.

Her resolutions were challenged in different ways including large class size, unruly backbenchers and peer pressure from high school girlfriends, but she stayed focused, attending all "lectures" and studying hard.

First exams came and she felt ready and confident. The questions were easy and she had done enough, or so she thought.

A few weeks later news circulated that results were to be posted on a common notice board in front of the university registrar's office. A crowd gathered in anticipation. A proud secretary emerged from the office, repelled the crowd with an arrogance if measured as liquid, would have filled all earthly oceans, and stapled pieces of papers on the notice board one after the other. The crowd surged forward, shoving and pushing to get to the board, as if wanting to see the results before those magical papers vanished into thin air. Jubilation, anguish, disappointment, outright shock or any emotion one could think of had a home in the crowd.

Unlike her high school friends, Maureen was shocked by her scores. She'd failed. To one of her friends, it was time to let Maureen know who the winners and losers were in this instance.

"I know you studied hard for the exams and ideally you should be celebrating right now. But you know it takes more than good answers in exams to succeed in this university," her friend said, half consoling but mostly reprimanding her for thinking she wasn't the compromising type; the best one of the group.

"Yes, it takes correct answers in exams and good conduct and I have them both," Maureen said.

"Listen girlfriend, good conduct counts but you have the definition mixed up. It is simple; you've got to make yourself known to professors. With your beauty, all you need are the right dress and strategic visits to their

offices. When the door shuts and you cooperate, or may I say, show some good conduct, your name gets recognized and the marks flow,” her friend advised.

Maureen had gotten this hint a few times before but still couldn’t come to terms with the idea. That wasn’t her idea of a university. She was there to grow in academic knowledge and not to know old men and their rotten ways. She had big dreams and dignity was part of it all; she wasn’t going to let some *pig* with a pen steal that from her. She was going to confront her professors.

Fueled by anger, she quickly walked the 200 meters that separated her and the block of buildings housing offices. The first office was down a corridor, close to a flight of stairs. The sound of old, overworked air conditioners drowned the noise from the outside. Down the hallway, a young woman emerged from a professor’s office and hurried out of the building through an opposite door from Maureen as if running from danger or eager to conceal the fact that she’d been in there. That was a red flag but Maureen pressed on, ignoring the sixth sense urging her to turn around and get out.

“Come in,” said a deep voice in office number one in response to Maureen’s knock on the door. She opened the door and stepped in gingerly, her earlier anger haven been replaced by a mixture of fear and nervousness. From behind his desk, the learned professor, or rather, learned predator, looked up and immediately assumed a willing customer had brought a hot dish to serve. His “salivation” was almost evident, both in his mouth and elsewhere as he leaned back in his seat. Smiling, he waited for the niceties he’d become accustomed to; the

flattery that fed his huge ego and gave him the illusion of desirability.

However, he was everything but desirable. This man was short, about 5 foot 4 inches tall. His long, gray beard and overgrown mustache left barely enough room for his mouth. His eyebrows and eyelashes were in a length contest. This overindulgence in facial hair was probably a compensation for his baldness. Sitting, his potbelly was the furthest protrusion on his body, extending half the length of his bent knees, a pregnant male syndrome credited to his over consumption of beer. With his combination of outfit and looks, he could have passed for a homeless lunatic instantly transported into an office, a caricature.

Yet he wielded a lot of power on campus.

Maureen, instantly frightened and repulsed, fought the urge to bolt out of the office. *Courage, Maureen, courage!* she encouraged herself quietly and went on to speak.

“Prof, I answered all questions in your exam exactly how you taught us. I can say I reproduced your script...in my own words of course. So, I don’t understand why I failed,” Maureen said, with a serious look that annoyed the professor.

“You are one of the naïve ones, aren’t you?” he asked, disappointed he’d misread the situation and angry she had the audacity to question him. A lesson in university manners was required.

“We owe nobody, and I mean nobody, an explanation for what they get in exams,” the professor stressed. “However, since you’re here, I’ll show you how

marks get transferred in this place,” he said walking over to lock his office door. Maureen had no time to react, the ugly *pig* moving too fast for his age. Almost paralyzed by fear and the enormity of his BO, her fight felt but like a tickle to him.

"Let me go!" she screamed but this was muffled, her head pressed tightly against his body, her nose and mouth resting mid chest. He must have perfected his act over the years, for he maneuvered her into a seat in a flash. She kicked frantically from beneath, her knee barely missing his crotch and hitting the base of his potbelly.

Her resistance was quickly broken; he dug into forbidden places and consumed the forbidden fruit. It was over, at least for the predator, as quickly as it had begun. But for Maureen, it was just the beginning of an ordeal. She'd never known any worse five minutes in her life, five minutes that would haunt her forever after and snowball into bigger issues.

As she stumbled to her feet, her attacker, showing absolutely no remorse, gave a warning that sounded like something from a well-rehearsed script.

“Don’t tell or you’ll never graduate from this university,” he said, twisting his overgrown mustache, revealing a monster with horns beneath the nose or perhaps mimicking a boar with out-of-control tusks. “We all do it anyway, so don’t think anybody will care if you report,” he said on second thought, followed by a cynical smile and a snort of satisfaction.

Maureen walked out of his office head down, just like the young woman she'd seen earlier down the hallway.

What was I thinking? she asked herself. Outside the building, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a group of young men looking at her, or so it seemed. *Did they know? Did everyone know?* she wondered. The pain was immense as she sobbed all the way home and cried herself to sleep later that night, a routine she would repeat for a long time to come.

She couldn't tell her brother because she would've been blamed for putting herself in that vulnerable situation; blaming the victim was common. She couldn't report to the university authorities; the professor was probably correct, no one would've done anything. The police? That would've been even worse. Suffer in silence seemed her only option and she became good at it.

Having only one university in the whole country meant enduring the sight of her attacker for a couple more years or forgo her dream of getting a university degree. She wasn't the type to quit on her dreams but going to class was no longer the same; tardiness, lack of concentration, withdrawal from friends and uncharacteristic silence became part of her coping mechanism.

Recognizing how unprepared she was for the next examinations, and knowing that genuine failure was inevitable, she almost quit. Then she began to rationalize. *My dignity has already been stolen, so what else do I have to lose? I might as well just compromise with the professors. All my friends probably do it anyway,* she told herself. She soon made the painful decision to join the bandwagon exchanging favors with professors.

Unfortunately, professors provided marks, not money for the nice dresses that got the prey noticed. That money had to come from elsewhere, a gap eventually filled by tycoons and sugar daddies. A pattern was soon established: compromise with professors for marks and the neighborhood tycoon, drug dealers and others for cash. It was strictly business, no emotional attachment to the “filthy pigs with deep pockets,” a phrase she’d coined for the rich men.

Life went on and she inched closer to her dream. But soon troubling health issues began to surface: weight loss, headaches, recurrent diarrhea, coughing among other things. These were explained away as stress, malaria and so on. But they became persistent and a hospital visit confirmed what she would rather deny. She was immunocompromised. Some of those “pigs with deep pockets” and professors in her life had come with deadly packages and unbeknownst to Maureen, she’d picked up more than cash and marks; she was infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Degree almost in hand, her dream close to being realized, Maureen also saw her quality of life ebbing. She could seek help as this was no longer the death sentence it used to be. But her anger was overwhelming and she could think of nothing else but the injustice she’d suffered in the hands of men.

“The more you think about it, the angrier you become,” is the common saying about that which makes someone angry. Maureen ruminated on the injustice of life until she was totally consumed by a desire for revenge against the men who had wronged her.

Retaining her ammunition for revenge meant rejection of vital treatment.

In her quest for vengeance, every man was a target. From city to city she went, offering self and content to any man who showed any interest. Seduction became her nature, prey somehow becoming a learned predator; devising ways of making the sexual contact unprotected. If it didn't feel unsafe enough, an *accidental* cut occurred and blood was exchanged, spreading her virus far and wide; sweeping her way across the nation like a slow moving hurricane, except this one was a silent storm whose toll of destruction is known months or years after it has long passed.

As the storm rolled across the nation, the weapon for revenge, like that two-edged sword, was cutting both ways, perhaps dealing the avenger a bigger blow, for her plight became obvious to everyone. At this point, she had lost a tremendous amount of weight. Skin on bone was a most appropriate description, the anatomy of all bony protuberances discernable through her rough skin.

In the late stages, bedridden, she refused all medical help, determined to exit on her own terms.

There was, nevertheless, some regret before the light went out, an opportunity to heal the mind even if the body couldn't be healed.

"I've done much harm to men," Maureen confessed to her now elderly mother; the woman who had nursed her at birth and was now "nursing" her to death. "I believed all men deserved harm for what other men had done to me," she continued.

She'd already told her mother what happened to her in the university.

"But some innocent men became my victims. Two wrongs have never made anything right," she said.

After a long, pensive pause, she took a deep breath and continued to speak slowly.

"Mama, you see, some things in life are beyond our control. But when bad things happen to us, we choose our reaction. In my case, I played the victim not the survivor," she said, giving a glimpse of the wisdom that resided within the frail being she had become. With her frail hand resting in her mother's palm, it became evident that sickness had been more merciless on her than age and hard labor had been on her mother.

"Victim. Survivor. What difference does it make?" her mother asked between sobs and sniffles. "It doesn't change the wrong they did to you my daughter, and to me," she continued.

Maureen's mother had just fallen from grace to grass; from being one of few women in the village with daughters in the university, the pride of the village, held in high esteem by many, to now becoming the joke of the village, the one whose daughter had brought back a city bug and curse to the village. To the haters, the ones who detested her for going against their norm of denying the girl child an education, she was reaping the fruits of her bad choices and therefore, undeserving of any sympathy. She would rather die first than bury her daughter and endure pain and ridicule from her kin.

There comes a time when the sick becomes the encourager.

“Mama, there is a huge difference between victims and survivors. Both suffer injustice or tragedy, but somehow victims find a way to victimize while survivors turn things around for good,” Maureen explained. “Mama, be a survivor for my sake. Talk about me, my triumphs, my achievements, you know, the things you were proud of. Also talk about my mistakes, not in a sorrowful way but in a way that will educate the little girls in this village. Any little girl who dares to dream big deserves a fair shot and knowing the *Goliaths* she may have to slay before reaching her goal, will prepare her for the bumpy ride,” she said.

She knew she’d missed an opportunity to shine the spotlight on the evil world of corrupt and decadent professors. She’d missed an opportunity to save the lives of others who would come after her, an opportunity to end the culture of female victimization in the university and other institutions of higher learning in Ekelle.

There were more victims after Maureen and the predators continue to camp in wait for more unsuspecting prey.

Was Maureen a wolf in sheep skin?

Chapter 3

The Boy and The Monkey

Every season has its challenges. Fortunately Nonimb, a remote village in the tropics, has just two: dry and rainy.

The dry season is dry and dusty, with chilly mornings and extremely hot afternoons. The heat dries trees and towards the end of the season, human beings and animals. It's the season the villagers love at the beginning yet despise toward the end, particularly when it extends past March. Should be called harsh season for that is what it is, harsh on everything and everyone.

Thank heavens for the lone stream that survives the punishing draught-like conditions of Nonimb; a survival made possible by the resilient trees at the source and a somewhat symbiotic existence along the course, the stream giving water to the trees whose shade shields the water from the rebuffing tropical sun. This stream, dwindled in volume, is the main source of water, like the main artery, conveying oxygenated blood and thus life to every entity in the body that is Nonimb.

At the harshest point of this season, feet sink ankle deep into dust and the atmosphere is a dust cloud. But there's a silver lining in this "dust" cloud; the village becomes connected to the rest of the nation, impassable roads with ruts and pits getting a natural correction,

levelled in by dust such that overloaded old Toyota Corollas, unacceptable in the city, can navigate the way to the village.

March comes and everyone looks to the sky for dark clouds that signal the coming of rain and the beginning of the rainy season, the season of abundant water, which brings with it plenty of good but also some bad like floods, landslides and muddy, impassable roads.

The clouds arrive but don't necessarily stay, wind carrying them to places perhaps more deserving of the showers of blessings. Eventually they come and stay, bringing Nonimb its share of rain, very light; even the almighty hasn't drunk enough to pass a substantial amount of water. But this is greeted with excitement; abundant water and fresh food will soon be available.

Trees reveal a hunger that can only be satisfied by a sustainable collaboration between chlorophyll, water and sunlight, a delicate balancing act often overlooked. Therefore, any rain water has to extinguish the thirst of the ground before filling stalks of trees, grass and shrubs, and dousing planted seeds to sprout.

Farmers, cognizant of the unpredictable 21st century weather, wait for second or third rainfall, for a sufficiency of ground water, before planting.

Diverse crops are planted, corn being the main interest because in Nonimb dinner is never complete without a dish made from corn.

Here's where Kilesen's story begins. Kilesen was fourteen years old, and had a lot to dislike about this time of the year, except he didn't have to trek 5

kilometres to fetch water from the lone stream. He'd just returned from secondary school for vacation, vacation in this case being a misnomer. It coincided with the planting season for a reason, everybody getting included in the sowing of seeds once rains arrived.

The sowing of corn ushered in another challenge in life: the ownership battle between man and animals, bush fowls unearthing and consuming planted seeds. Survivors of this onslaught were uprooted once they sprouted and stretched for the sun. So farmers had to protect their planted seeds.

Kilesen was responsible for protecting the family farm. His ten kilometre walk to the farm started at dawn for an arrival just prior to the emergence of the avian menace, which he repelled with smoke, noise and stones.

Germination of seeds and formation of leaves attracted herbivores. These wicked creatures, from Kilesen's perspective, avoided the abundant free-for-all fresh elephant grass around the farms, opting to torture farmers by consuming their freshly germinated corn. These were repelled the same way as the bush fowls and occasionally captured for meat.

Back to school usually intervened, school far from the village being a respite from hard work and time for Kilesen to do what he cherished most - study. But this didn't always last very long, the third term "vacation" often coming too quickly for his liking. He returned to the village in June and back to protecting crops.

By now corncobs would've formed on the corn plant and along came the more sophisticated and shrewd animals - monkeys. They love their corn on the cob,

fresh, tender and sweet; are tough to scare and scary to confront.

A particularly intriguing monkey, a loner with a routine, instilled both fear and curiosity in Kilesen. At each visit, it cautiously approached a scarecrow at the edge of the farm, shook it, went around and jabbed its behind with a stick. Kilesen usually watched from a hidden spot, scared. It would proceed to pick the biggest corncob around, harvesting it just like humans did and eating while studying its surroundings. Kilesen only relaxed after it left, always taking with it an extra corncob for later. Unlike the ravaging troop, this monkey seemed considerate, not wasting any harvest and not destroying any other plants.

Kilesen eventually grew in courage and planned to kill the monkey, all by himself. He could've requested reinforcement but acting alone was a mark of maturity, a way to gain bragging rights and stand out from his peers. But all he had were his bow and poisoned arrow.

This day the monkey did its routine and settled down for a meal. Kilesen moved to a slightly elevated position with a clear view of the animal's back, ready to shoot. It turned just in time to spot him, ducked and took cover behind a tree trunk before he could release the arrow. Then came a deep manly voice with a slight quaver like an old man.

"Careful kid, don't shoot me. I mean you no harm, I promise," the monkey said in impeccable Noni, Kilesen's dialect.

Kilesen fell flat on his back, his weapon flying out of his hands.

Minutes later, he opened one eye, then the other and his first sight was the same monkey that had scared him breathless, sitting close by, his weapon in its hands. He froze with fear.

"Can't a monkey have a meal in peace?" the monkey asked.

Kilesen rubbed his eyes hard. No he wasn't daydreaming; it was a monkey and it spoke his dialect.

"You are... an animal. Animals don't speak... human," Kilesen said, in a weak voice. "Except parrots maybe," he added, wiping his eyes again, wanting to wake up, to end this nightmare or see clearly.

But he was seeing clearly, it was still a monkey.

The monkey laughed.

"Aren't we all animals? In some ways, in fact in most ways, I'm a better animal than humans," the monkey said.

"But you didn't answer my question," Kilesen said, beginning to gain some courage and composure. "I've never heard a monkey speak Noni," he added, lifting his upper body off the ground and resting on his left elbow.

"Did you pose a question? I believe you made a statement resulting from your biased human perspective," the monkey said. "By the way, don't do anything you'll regret," the monkey said, retreating a few steps, arrow pointing menacingly at Kilesen's chest.

"I'll not hurt you, I promise," Kilesen said, eager to gain the monkey's trust. "Now tell me how you learned to speak my language."

"It is a mystery even to me," the monkey said, unwilling to go any deeper.

The rising tropical sun signaled time for a retreat into the forest, escape before the arrival of older men.

“I have to run. Say nothing to anyone about me, else the whole village might hunt for me. Knowing how superstitious humans are, they’ll think consuming a monkey of my caliber could give them supernatural strengths. My skull will find a high place in their shrine too, and they’ll worship it as if I’m a god,” the monkey said.

“For a monkey, you have excessive knowledge about humans. You’re perhaps a human in monkey skin, a banished wizard of some sort,” Kilesen said.

“Hey, I’m out of time, will you keep this our interaction a secret or not? Be nice to me. You know, humans say ‘you scratch my back I scratch yours,’ which, I must say, is directly out of the monkey’s book of life,” the monkey said, still threatening with the bow and arrow.

“I’ll not tell anyone, I promise,” Kilesen said, his eyes on the bow and arrow, afraid the hunter could still become the hunted.

The monkey dropped the weapon and scampered off.

“See you next time,” Kilesen said.

“Who were you conversing with?” Kilesen’s mother, who’d just arrived, asked.

“No one Mama. Just scaring any animals that might be lurking in the bushes,” Kilesen lied, dead set on keeping his promise to the monkey.

The incredible animal was on his mind all day. A Noni-speaking monkey still felt like a dream. Had anyone ever seen one that spoke any language, he wondered and decided he would pick Mr. Brown Kinyese's brain that evening.

Mr. Kinyese was the custodian of knowledge and archives about the village, nothing written, all mental. His consultation fee was nominal - a kola nut.

A brief visit to Mr. Kinyese later that evening yielded some clues. Kilesen heard the tale of the village magician who might've returned from the dead as a monkey. The rest was left to imagination.

The next day he went to the farm eager to talk to the monkey. Half an hour later, came a now familiar voice.

"Good morning friend," the monkey greeted.

"I have a question for you," Kilesen said, ignoring the animal's friendliness.

"I'll answer any questions, but only after I eat some corn," the monkey said, scanning around for a good corncob which wasn't hard to find.

"Appears we're in for a long conversation. Under a tree will be good so I can swing on branches," the monkey said, leading the way.

Perceiving Kilesen's hesitation, it added, "Your crops are safe."

Trusting an animal's word on crop safety didn't seem reasonable but he followed the monkey anyway, eager to ask the burning question on his mind.

They sat down under a tree at the edge of the farm, surrounded by tall grass.

“Great place. I can, without much of a stretch, escape from any unpleasant surprise,” the monkey said, looking around as if to reassure itself. “Now ask me what is burning in that small human brain of yours.”

“I heard a monkey story in the village. Trust me, I didn’t tell anyone about you but could it be true.... I mean.....is it possible what they say?” Kilesen stuttered.

“What do they say? That we are the most intelligent animals on earth? What? Tell me,” the monkey asked.

“I’m thinking you are a reincarnated human, possibly the old magician who died a decade ago. He’d joked he would watch his own funeral from a tree in his yard and it’s rumoured that the day he died a monkey was spotted in that tree. At the instruction of the village chief, the monkey was left alone. It’s believed he moved to the forest and proceeded with life as a monkey. With your abilities, you see why I might be right to say you’re that same monkey?” Kilesen asked.

“Incredible story. Humans are such gullible creatures; the things they believe! No it’s not true but I get it. I mean, who wouldn’t want to be a monkey with every one of our qualities?” the monkey asked. “It makes perfect sense for humans to fantasize about dying and returning as monkeys, to live our fulfilling lives. But sorry friend, it’s all fantasy,” the monkey concluded.

“On the contrary, I learned in school that monkeys became humans; that black monkeys like you became black men then white men, which fits the slavery and colonial era stereotype that black is primitive. If I were to believe this, I would say there were two lineages, one that led to white monkeys then to white men, and the

other that led to black monkeys then black men; I would say blacks and whites are at the same level of evolution, not one preceding the other. Perhaps whites came from the tropical forest in South America, from the white monkeys, and Asians from the white monkeys in their region. I mean, what if the whole evolution theory is flawed? No one is investigating the theory, they work hard to prove the theory, twisting every finding to fit their tunnel vision and perpetuate a stereotype. I certainly don't believe blacks are a transitional point to whites," Kilesen stressed, leaving the monkey perplexed.

"Sorry, I don't expect you to understand what I just said. However, assuming there is truth to evolution, you should be proud you're the origin of the human race, but that's probably all you should gloat about," Kilesen said.

"Why would I want to lose what I have to become almost invalid and hopeless like humans? I wasn't born helpless like humans," the monkey said, swinging from branch to branch, going behind Kilesen, causing him to spin around to keep sight of it. "Human babies are pathetic. They stare at things, wiggle their toes, cry when they need something and can't do anything for themselves. And when they start to move, they wriggle on the ground like caterpillars, then try to imitate monkeys by walking on hands and feet but are lousy at it. I pity humans. I'll not change a thing about my life but you say I became you? That is the most pathetic thing I've ever heard," the monkey said.

"A monkey's opinion on humans and their cute, highly intelligent babies. Am I supposed to take it seriously?" Kilesen asked, with a dismissive laugh. "By

the way, you seem to really like corn. With your intelligence and strengths, why don't you grow your own?" Kilesen asked.

"Why? I have workers like you," the monkey replied, with what looked like surprise.

"No we don't work for you. You steal and destroy our crops. You know it, which is why you come when we're absent and flee when we arrive," Kilesen said, upset at the main reason for his sleep interruption at that point.

"Look kid, I had my habitat. There was plenty for me to eat until humans came with their sharp objects, cut down my trees and reduced my habitat. Envision someone coming to your village and decimating your structures, beginning with the solid, most admired ones. That's what your type did to my property, my habitat, just because we lacked the means to fight. You came in and destroyed the big trees, the ones with a history." The monkey paused momentarily, apparently overwhelmed with emotions. This is the point where humans shed a tear or more.

"You don't even know it kid. My great grandfather was conceived under the giant tree that once graced the center of the forest. We celebrated that tree; it was like a shrine, a place for family reunions. Then one day humans came with a loud machine and cut it down. We watched in horror from our hiding place as a historic site went down and was chopped into chunks. That was the most painful blow humans dealt us, I mean apart from the vicious attacks and killings that we continue to suffer in their hands," the monkey said, its head down.

“That is very sad. I never knew monkeys had sentiments. You mean you discuss these things among yourselves and even remember them for this long?” Kilesen asked.

“Of course we discuss the wickedness of humans but permit me complete my answer to your question about corn. You know, unlike humans, we eat healthy; we are vegetarians for the most part. When humans cut the shrubs close to the forest and started planting corn we thought they were finally making up for their foolish ruinous ways, we thought they were replenishing our food source they’d taken from us. Were we ever wrong! When the corn was ripe for us, we came to feast but were greeted with arrows and stones and it has been so ever since. What were we to do?” the monkey asked, looking Kilesen in the eyes. He thought he saw a deep pain in those hollow eyes. “We did the logical thing, which was to come when it’s quiet, when crazy humans are gone,” the monkey concluded.

They both sat silent for a while, a silence only interrupted by the occasional rodents and singing birds that dared to come near them. Kilesen was apparently thinking, analysing the actions of humans and the monkey had a numb look. Finally, he broke the silence and startled a nearby bird into flight.

“You’ve certainly given me another perspective on things. If it makes you feel better, most humans cut the forest not to harm monkeys or other animals. They require wood for construction and other things. But some are just outright wicked and reckless. If you must know, the big trees are not cut by individuals from here.

That wood goes all the way to the developed world; locals get in trouble for cutting those very big trees reserved for export, the ones you rightly call shrines. And you know what else I learned in school? That the cutting of trees is also affecting humans far and near; the dry season used to be short but is getting progressively longer and harsher, dryness has come into our valleys once overwhelmed with water, the rainy season becoming lighter, not providing enough water to recharge waterways; they say it's global warming and it affects the entire world in different ways. Some faraway places are getting excess water due to melting ice, while we here are getting less water. It's just a matter of time before our streams completely dry in the dry season and I don't know what will become of this village but logically, with a prolonged absence of water, we'll all perish. So my friend, we are in the same boat; humans are, perhaps unintentionally, wicked to themselves as much as they are to monkeys," Kilesen said.

"They're unquestionably wicked to monkeys, reason why I ought to go to the woods at this moment," the monkey said.

They'd talked too profound and long, forgetting about time.

"Why are you always alone?" Kilesen asked.

"Sorry, I've got to go. I'll answer your question tomorrow," the monkey said, talking over its shoulder as it rushed off.

Soon after, a "boom" sound reverberated through the valleys and hills like the rumble of thunder preceding

a heavy tropical torrential downpour. It was unmistakable.

The neighboring farmer had a locally made gun never used unless to bring down a hefty target. Kilesen rushed in the direction of the gunshot and there it was, in a pool of its own blood. The old monkey was dead, shot in the back from close proximity.

He strolled back to the last spot they'd sat for the long conversation and cried, grieving the passing of a friend.

The End

There is no denying the havoc HIV/AIDS has wrecked around the globe. The worst impact is seen in the developing world and in impoverished communities in the developed world. However, being HIV positive is not a death sentence. Why then do many still die from it? *Denial is the Killer* is a fictionalisation of the reality on why and how the persisting vestiges of HIV/AIDS devastation can be stopped.

* * *

DR. CHARLES NFON is a research scientist, with a focus on veterinary virology and immunology. He was born in Cameroon and currently lives in Canada. He has always been interested in writing stories but only started writing in earnest about four years ago. His short essay “Ushered out of one, accepted at another” was one of nineteen stories shortlisted in 2014 for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) “Canada writes” series on belonging. He was the winner of the Anglophone Cameroon Writers Association’s emerging writer award in 2015. He has published a novel “The Divine Alien” and a collection of short stories about emigration “Greener From a Distance.” His ambition is to continuously improve on his writing and use his stories to make an impact on people.



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